

MAI editor, Bob Sykes, talks to the eclectic Kevin Chan about his passion for all things martial - from Wing Chun to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu!

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**K**evin Chan has been a martial art practitioner since childhood and founder of the *Kamon Martial Art Federation* in 1992, which has successful academies all over the UK. A practitioner in constant search of knowledge, after over 10 years of training BJJ, Kevin became one of the four only black belts in the world awarded by the legendary Mauricio Gomes (founder of Gracie Barra UK), father of multiple BJJ and ADCC world champion Roger Gracie. Kevin continues to train and teach both BJJ and Wing Chun, constantly evolving his game...

**Why and where did you originally get involved in martial arts?**

I originally got into martial arts whilst living in Hong Kong at around 11 years old. Initially I learnt my uncle's personal style of Kung Fu - Kuen Mo. I went on to learn Gung Lik Kune, Tong Long with Sifu H B Un. Later, when I was living in the UK, I studied Wing Chun with Sifu Steven Mair and trained under Sam Kwok and Yip Chun. Following this, I established the *Kamon Martial Art Federation* - that has been a big part of my life ever since. I took up groundwork with my student and friend, Artur Lutkis, who taught me Sombó, and I continued to train Sombó with Ross Mockridge. Eventually I started to learn Jiu Jitsu with Chen Moraes, and then with Mauricio Gomes - my primary teacher - and his son, Roger Gracie. Despite having already two decades of martial arts behind me, which

includes the grappling arts, Mauricio used to beat me around the mat effortlessly and I felt completely helpless.

Although it was a complete domination and an uphill battle just to survive, he made the experience enjoyable in a sick sort of way. His classes were relaxed yet focussed and training was more like hanging out with a bunch of friends than a structured class which I was previously used to. I believe I flourished in this type of environment he created. I now teach in the same spirit as I learnt from Mauricio. I am truly blessed to have trained with him and to have received my black belt from him.

My previous martial art training has also included Boxing at the Park Tavern, Streatham until it closed down, continuing to train with my friend and Boxing coach, Paul Weber. During this period I Kickboxed extensively with Dino Meringo and Dave Van Gass. Neil McLeod has helped me with my clinch work and wrestling. I have been very fortunate throughout my life as I have always had skilled training partners who have all helped me in one form or another, which I am very grateful for...

**Has what you have learned affected the way you train?**

Yes, most definitely. How I used to train in my early teens to early twenties was much more classical training. Until my mid twenties it was what I see as my apprenticeship years, and was very much about finding myself. In my later twenties it was a case of establishing what I needed to do to improve myself as a martial art practitioner. This was the period that I established the *Kamon Martial Art Federation* which itself became a necessary step to explore and express myself through the art of Wing Chun. It was around this time that I made a transition from being a martial arts practitioner to being what I consider to be a martial artist

# Kevin Chan

a man for all seasons

## INTERVIEW

in the true sense. The major difference between how I train now stems from this transition, in that I now know my self. I train what I believe in, and I believe in what works. I no longer feel a need to justify what I have to do to develop myself to myself or to others. I trust my self-awareness and intuition. In the past for instance, when I explored other arts apart from Wing Chun it was frowned upon. Or if I experimented with ideas, it was seen as not traditional and therefore a form of deviation, and was dismissed as my not understanding Wing Chun. Some in the Wing Chun community would try to make you feel guilty or were very quick to put you down. Now I don't care... I enjoy what I do and I enjoy what I teach and I can see the results.

At 43, I am very aware of time-wasting. I try to be as productive as possible in the available time, whether it is training or teaching. For instance, in my own training in BJJ, I always use a stop watch. One hour of sparring normally takes two hours. Every time I time the belt up again, take a drink of water, chat etc... I stop the clock. I always add on extra time, and always look for the maximum benefit in my time. I am not looking for short cuts or a way of cutting corners, but am always interested in how to achieve results more effectively.

In my Wing Chun teaching I teach the complete classical Wing Chun system. I always teach the depth of understanding behind the art, but I don't like dragging it out, or making it something it's not... I am very pragmatic, and not interested in doing things for the sake of doing them, they have to produce results. I don't like being, or teaching my students to be busy fools.

**You teach Wing Chun and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu - surely two opposite ends of the scales. Are there any common threads or are they simply styles apart?**



There are no similarities in techniques. For me, the common threads are conceptual. Both Wing Chun and BJJ rely on intuition, awareness of your own body, an awareness of an opponent's body through tactile feel, muscle memory, timing and flow and an understanding of using force correctly. For me, understanding and being able to put these factors into action is far more important than techniques alone. An understanding of these factors allows you to be adaptable and versatile. I use these same concepts in all the arts I practice. I believe that, to understand these concepts is to understand one of the key factors of effective fighting, whatever style. Much of what I train and teach incorporates this element above all else.

For me, Wing Chun gave me a great awareness of my body to practise Jiu Jitsu. Jiu Jitsu gave me a phenomenal advantage of feel through resistance to develop my understanding of the above factors for Wing Chun. Both arts help enrich each other...

Teaching WC and BJJ is no different. I believe in deconstructing a style and adapting it to a person's build and mindset. I do not have 'eureka' moments. Everything comes out through play over time. In both arts I dislike the 'biff mentality!' I don't enjoy what my BJJ colleague, Michael Russell calls 'Biff Jui Jitsu' or I call 'Biff Chun.' I always believe in using appropriate force at a given moment. Whilst I believe in effectiveness, I don't believe that this should just be achieved through power and aggression, or what my BJJ students call meat-head moves. It's simply not for me... Like I say to my BJJ white belts, 'Some of you would already be black belts if it was just based on aggression and toughness.'



**Do you think that, to be a good fighter, you should focus on one style?**

It depends on whether you mean a good fighter for Jiu Jitsu, Mixed Martial Arts, or self defence... For a good fighter in Jiu Jitsu, he may only need to do one style if his concern is neither for MMA or self defence. He may want to supplement it with wrestling or Judo, but if he wants to be a good Jiu Jitsu fighter for competitions there is little point training something like Kickboxing. He can focus solely on Jiu Jitsu and the arena he is specifically training for.

If you want to be a good fighter for self defence, it's a whole different story. I believe every style has strengths and weaknesses. To deny that your style has any weaknesses means that either you don't know your style, have an unrealistic appreciation of fighting, or that you are simply living in denial... I believe that if you add cross-training arts like Boxing, Jiu Jitsu, clinchwork and maintain an open minded and realistic approach to attack and defence to pre-emptive strikes it will naturally allow your art to grow whatever the style.

**Is this what you regard as a complete martial artist?**

These are some of the factors, but the greatest factor is the mindset. By mindset I don't mean just how assertive one is in a fight. Being a complete martial artist is about how he deals with himself and how honest he is with himself... He must accept being uncomfortable, mentally, for change and development to happen. It is nature's way of moving forward. For the practitioner of the traditional martial arts, accepting methods, strategy, or techniques from other arts is often difficult, even though it is logically beneficial. I believe that the complete martial artist needs to have a realistic understanding of himself and, despite feeling anxiety to change, will seek new experiences and adapt himself accordingly and continue to grow and develop, which will benefit both himself and his art as a result.

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It's funny really but Wing Chun is the only art I have trained where people will insist, when they have been hit, that YOU are doing it wrong rather than admit they have a hole in their game. They cannot accept what has just happened and, instead of re-addressing their training to solve the problem so that it doesn't happen again, they live in denial.

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Humans being humans use excuses and, although in BJJ they don't try to tell you that you are wrong when you are submitting or dominating, excuses still occur. They will say things like 'he is strong' in an effort to take away your technical ability or ask about your weight in an effort to say you have a weight and strength advantage, or may even make statements like, 'I have not trained lately...' implying that they could probably beat you if they had been training more... I believe, as a complete martial artist, you should be honest to yourself and avoid excuses.



If you would like any further information about Kamon BJJ, please email [info@kamonbjj.com](mailto:info@kamonbjj.com)

To be a complete martial artist requires self acceptance and appropriately addressing your strengths and weaknesses. A practitioner must accept a drop in their level of comfort as part of their training and growth can only happen through physical and mental adversity and challenges. Through training he develops the mental capacity to master himself and thus become complete.

**What's your training schedule consist of?**

Training, for me, is a lifestyle. I am a martial artist. I don't train because I have to, but because I want to. Whether Wing Chun, Jiu Jitsu, Boxing or whatever... I would much rather hang out on the mats than go out to the bars and clubs or go shopping, it is a lifestyle choice. I am very fortunate to have good people around me who are passionate about what they do - we share a common love of martial arts. I train every day - how much and what depends on what I have on and who I am training with on that day. I normally do at least two hours of stand-up a day, whether it is Wing Chun, Boxing or Clinchwork - mainly because these are the areas some of my private students want to work on. Some of the private students I develop come around and do an hour of chi sao or an hour of sparring so, during that time, it allows me to train and I am getting paid for it!

I have not quite managed to achieve this with Jiu Jitsu simply because I have only started teaching it professionally since attaining my black belt three years ago. With BJJ, I meet my training partners and friends to train at least four times a week. Every day I am doing something I enjoy. I count myself incredibly lucky to do something like martial arts that I am passionate about whilst supporting my family through it.

**What do you say to critics who claim you are no longer serious about Wing Chun?**

I would say I am a martial artist first and foremost. Because

Tradition should only ever serve as a base for further exploration, it definitely shouldn't be a constraint that prevents or restricts exploration. In a changing environment an organism's adaptability is the key to its success, Wing Chun is no different. I guess, what I would say to critics of my adapting Wing Chun is that my adaptation of Wing Chun is simply an expression of the Wing Chun art itself.



I do BJJ, it does not mean that I am not serious about Wing Chun or I favour BJJ over Wing Chun. If you have children, you don't love one more than the other, you love them equally and appreciate their differences. In actual fact, I probably train more Wing Chun now than I ever did!

**What do you say to critics of your deviation from the traditional and your personal adaptation of Wing Chun?**

My personal adaptation changes... it will keep changing. How it works in three years time will probably be different from how it works now. Wing Chun and training should be seen as a point in time, constantly adapting and changing. The BJJ practitioner is very quick to adapt. They readily absorb new techniques and new ideas and are not restricted by the view that they cannot learn a technique if it is from a different academy or style. They value progression and evolution. Looking forward rather than the traditionalist looking back to a time they think was better.

Wing Chun is a concept based art, with an incredible richness for self expression at its core. Many practitioners don't realise this - they think it is a literal art. They get stuck at an early development level, of imitation and never progress to deeper levels of personal understanding and self expression. This results in a fixed and rigid understanding of Wing Chun. They prefer the comfort of clearly defined problems and solutions, techniques and specific applications of techniques, and this becomes limiting. They can see deviation from this robotic approach as deviating from Wing Chun itself.

**Is your adaptation of Wing Chun watered down?**

I have been criticised for teaching a watered down version of Wing Chun, but this simply isn't the case... Again, I think it arises from a lack of understanding of what I am actually doing with *Kamon*. I am not teaching MMA or watering down Wing Chun, I am developing myself and my students' understanding of Wing Chun through adaptation to an evolving understanding of Wing Chun and combat. I study my students hard and I carefully introduce new concepts, paying close attention to how these are being absorbed. If they are picked up we move on, if they are missed, I will find new ways of communicating the concepts. It is all about developing the students, and being sure they absorb the concepts in a working and practical sense. For instance, we do sparring in a similar vein to Boxing or stand up MMA, so people dismiss what I am doing as MMA and not Wing Chun. Or Wing Chun with a bit of Boxing thrown in. Learning Boxing has helped improve the art. Firstly, it gives you

realism, it teaches you to get over shock and fear, which a fight induces. Getting over shock and fear strengthens your mindset under pressure. You can then develop a working understanding of range and position and movement, lines of attack, rhythm and timing and what constitutes effective striking. Boxing should be seen as a great complement to Wing Chun, and should be endorsed rather than avoided. Rather than watering it down, Boxing is one of the arts that has enhanced my Wing Chun.

Changing the way I teach, adapting to the feedback I get from my students is nothing new to Wing Chun training - look at how Ip Man used to teach. Some of the key drills in Ip Man lineage Wing Chun are drills he created himself to bridge the gap between his and his student's knowledge, to convey his ideas. Some of these are trained today in such a rigid way - they have lost their meaning or purpose... I have further adapted the drills and way I teach to fit the students. The drills are a means to an end, not the end itself. They should not be sacred. Adaptability was the key to Wing Chun's success in the past, but for some reason has become lost to many through nostalgia or an overzealous clinging to tradition... Tradition should only ever serve as a base for further exploration, it definitely shouldn't be a constraint that prevents or restricts exploration. In a changing environment an organism's adaptability is the key to its success, Wing Chun is no different. I guess, what I would say to critics of my adapting Wing Chun is that my adaptation of Wing Chun is simply an expression of the Wing Chun art itself.

**So what's next for Kevin Chan?**

I have a few seminars in Hong Kong that I am looking forward to. I taught some earlier this year and last year that were arranged through my friend, Thomas Fan, who teaches BJJ and MMA over there. I taught some seminars on BJJ and some on Wing Chun. The Wing Chun seminars were about *Kamon* Wing Chun and how I like to train. They were attended by some very experienced Wing Chun guys and I shared some good ideas, which I hope they took away to develop their art in a practical and effective sense. I appreciated their attitude - they were very interested in ideas on how to develop Wing Chun.

I will continue to enjoy my life in the same way I do now. I want to do more wrestling and clinch work to improve my stand up in the clinch. I want to develop my Boxing, and I am currently looking at a new Boxing camp for fresh feedback for personal improvement. I still regard BJJ as a new art to me and I want to grow further with it. Although I have no current plans, I cannot see myself not competing again. At the same time, my Wing Chun is always organically growing through play and it will continue to develop this way.

More importantly, I want to develop my students (my friends) to the best of my ability as I truly believe the arts live through them.

BOB SYKES

